Chapter 3

In the Colony with Joy Division

Clayton Crockett

At the last table, where the camp doctor and the Master-Kalefactress were waiting, the fate of each girl was sealed. There the die was cast as to which of the two sections of the camp she would be sent—Labor Division, or Joy Division.

—Ka-tzetnik 135633, House of Dolls

One of the noteworthy things that Joy Division’s music does is to powerfully resist any transformation into a more positive context. These are not feel-good songs. Their lyrics are relentlessly negative, and culminated in the suicide of the troubled singer, Ian Curtis, on May 18, 1980. The apocryphal slogan “Ian Curtis died for your sins” testifies to the religious significance his music and death possessed for some fans. Curtis hanged himself just before the release of Joy Division’s last album, Closer, and an impending tour of the United States. He was an epileptic, his epilepsy was intensifying, and his marriage was also falling apart. Curtis’s life is seen to imitate his art, where his desperate suicide enacts a disturbing sacrifice that fulfills the prophecy of his deeply pessimistic lyrics.

Despite this pessimism, there is something sacred about the music of Joy Division, albeit not in a conventional religious sense. First of all, both popular and alternative music are predominantly secular, but they still possess an ability to connect people with something beyond themselves, at least emotionally and at least temporarily. I suggest that secular is not the opposite of sacred; rather, the opposite of sacred is profane, which might or might not be considered religious. Secular, from the Latin saeculum, means an era
or order, a period of time. For many people, the secular is what replaces religion, but I would argue instead that it relocates it. Modern secularity means that the sacred, which is similar to what is also called the holy, is not somewhere “up there” in a transcendent realm or heaven, but here all around us in an immanent way. Our modern and contemporary order is a secular order, a time where time is conceived as a one-dimensional linear process rather than a split-level two- (or three-) worlds affair. Once the sacred is not somewhere else, then anything can be potentially a vehicle for the sacred in a secular world, but most of the time most things are profane, ordinary, or banal.

Second, the manifestation of the sacred in modern art and music tends to be a more negative manifestation that disrupts our profane existence. One term for this pervasiveness of the sacred in a negative sense is sublime. Immanuel Kant famously theorized the sublime as a limit-experience in his third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, and I wrote about some of the religious and philosophical implications of the sublime in my book *A Theology of the Sublime*. Kant says that the sublime occurs when a person is confronted by something he or she cannot fully comprehend, either because it is too powerful or too enormous. This situation creates a feeling of negative purposiveness, because the apprehension of something like an explosive tornado is overwhelming and hence negative, but because it can be thought there is a kind of purposive satisfaction experienced on the part of the person viewing it, so long as it is from a safe distance. The key to the sublime is the fact that it is framed. As long as the frame is in place, the negative object or experience can be sublated or sublimated into a positive context. But, at its most acute, Joy Division’s music bursts the frame that separates it from its listeners, and draws its audience down with it into a dark and lonely place that cannot be transcended.

According to the Harvard scholar of religion Robert Orsi, the academic study of religion has been mainly “preoccupied with the study and defense of ‘good’ religion.” Orsi suggests that this preference to focusing on and highlighting the positive aspects of religion is a limitation, even if scholars of religion do not want to follow the simple-minded route of antireligious caricatures and dismissals. Orsi encourages scholars of religion to pay more attention to the existence and significance of negative transcendence, because “when the transcendent breaks into time… the transcendent is bound to get dirty.” So in response, I want to take religious or sacred experience seriously, but without implying that it would be positive or good. And what Orsi calls negative transcendence is one way to characterize punk and post-punk music in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s generally, and Joy Division’s music in particular.